



# State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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State Superintendent

## GENERAL SESSION ADDRESS

### WASB, WASDA, WASBO Joint Education Convention

*By Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
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Thank you for the great privilege of joining you today. I am honored to serve as your state superintendent.

As all of you know, we are in tough times. The unprecedented fiscal problems we face in Wisconsin present an enormous challenge for us as leaders. The magnitude of the decisions that will be made in the next months is great.

Just as the people of Wisconsin have entrusted me with providing every child in Wisconsin a quality education, you have been given the trust of your community to do the same. Together, we face a daunting challenge and responsibility to serve both today's school children and our state's long-term fiscal security.

This is not a time to get distracted. It is not a time for competing agendas or finger-pointing. It is not a time for partisanship or legislative gridlock. And it is not the time to pit one group against another. It is the time to bring leadership, commitment, and our shared values to bear, so together we can meet the challenges we face.

In tough times, priorities do matter. In tough times, we must work together to create a future of hope. The citizens of Wisconsin have long believed in the power of education to create opportunity. Last week, a Badger Poll conducted by the media showed that 89 percent of the people in Wisconsin said they want local schools to remain a top priority. So still, in these tough times, the people of Wisconsin understand that education is the engine for our long-term economic security.

As your state superintendent, I will be working with Gov. Jim Doyle, his new administration, and the Legislature, both Democrats and Republicans, to get our state's fiscal house in order and to balance the toughest budget the state has ever seen. I am committed to being a partner in meeting that enormous challenge.

And, as we all work together in developing a reformation budget that will bring us back in line and put our state on sound fiscal footing, we will make sure our children's education continues to be our No. 1 priority. As the budget stabilizes, we can enhance our investment in the educational priorities we know are necessary to ensure the excellence of public schools and libraries in Wisconsin.

Working together, at the state and local levels, we can provide the leadership to bring people together in balancing our shared responsibility of fiscal discipline and accountability with our shared value of putting our children and their education first.

With Wisconsin's strong tradition of access to great public schools and keeping the American dream alive for poor and working-class families, we must recognize that closing the achievement gap is our top educational priority. An investment in quality education today ensures our long-term economic security tomorrow. Future investments and support for children, families, and communities of poverty must be included in any educational reform and pro-growth economic plan pursued by the governor and the Legislature.

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We must close the achievement gap that separates children on the basis of race, economic status, or disability. This is not optional. This must be our promise to our children and to our state's future. Just as yesterday's children of European ancestry came to our state for the opportunity and promise of a better life through quality education, so, too, must Wisconsin's children of today who are Latino, Asian, American Indian, and African American. This is our New Wisconsin Promise for all of today's children.

It is my strong belief that when we work to close the achievement gap, we are working on the most important economic development activity in the state. When we close the achievement gap, we increase the graduation rate and close the earnings gap. We accomplish the goal of raising incomes, strengthening the state's economy, and positioning our state and its citizens for a future of opportunity.

The Census Bureau projects a typical high school graduate can expect, on average, to earn \$1.2 million over the course of his or her career. That figure rapidly climbs to over several million dollars for those with bachelor's, technical, and master's degrees.

Using annual salary data, we also learn that high school dropouts have at least a \$7,000 "earnings gap" when compared against graduates. The gap increases when compared against all working adults. A high school dropout only earns 55 percent of what a typical working adult earns. This earnings gap is real and continues to grow over time. This gap must be closed.

A simple projection over a 40-year working career finds a \$280,000 advantage for those who complete high school. With 518,000 Wisconsin residents without a high school diploma, the aggregate earnings gap represents a total potential loss of \$3.6 billion per year in state income and \$225 million in lost state sales and income tax revenues per year.

In Wisconsin, our large urban areas have long faced the challenge of high poverty rates, but small, rural districts, for which many of you serve, on the average have the lowest incomes. We must recognize this rural poverty and how it is complicated by isolation, lack of intervention programs, and the issue of transportation costs. Mitigating the effects of poverty and closing the achievement gap are both an urban and a rural challenge in Wisconsin.

Quality public education is the key to equal opportunity and upward mobility in our great state. Education must be Wisconsin's great equalizer, so we cannot turn our backs on any child or tolerate the failure of any school. By ensuring that our students graduate from high school, we can contribute \$3.6 billion in new earnings. That's nearly half-way toward the goal of moving our state to the national average of per capita earnings.

As we renew our commitment to education, we are mindful of the tremendous growth in the state's criminal justice system. We have had a 238 percent increase in the number of individuals incarcerated or placed under supervision in their communities in the 12 years since the Department of Corrections was formed. With an average annual incarceration cost of nearly \$27,000, we need to reduce those trends.

While there may not be a "dollar-for-dollar" tradeoff between education and corrections, there is an inverse relationship between educational achievement and incarceration rates:

- 51 percent of the offenders entering adult correctional institutions read below the ninth-grade level; 26 percent read below the sixth-grade level.
- 75 percent of the offenders entering adult correctional institutions test below the ninth-grade level in math; 40 percent test below the sixth-grade level.

We can invest in PK-12 education now, or as we see, we will pay later in social and corrections programs.

When we focus on closing the achievement gap, we are building a future where more citizens participate in our state's economy and democracy. We must work to raise achievement in order to create new hope and new opportunities.

John Dewey said, "Democracy must be reborn with each generation, and education is its midwife." Clearly, our future will be determined by how we educate today's children.

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I commend the new governor for pledging to balance the budget and make education his top priority as he leads the state through these tough times. As we work together to meet the challenge to close the budget gap, I ask Democrats and Republicans of the Legislature not to forget that closing the achievement gap in Wisconsin is morally the most important thing to do, and it makes the best economic sense.

That is why I believe that you—educational leaders from communities across Wisconsin—need local control strengthened with revenue flexibility to respond to the needs of all our children and to adequately fund quality education in our communities. Local control has been a guiding principle for the success we have had in Wisconsin. Decision-making by those closest to the classroom adds value to efforts to serve our children.

As state superintendent, I am always encouraged by the leadership shown in our schools. I recently met with students from Siren and Grantsburg high schools about the issue of students serving on school boards. According to the students, student representation on local school boards helps members understand how their decisions affect the students in the schools. As elected leaders, I encourage you to embrace student leadership in board decision-making.

Quality education in Wisconsin has long been the product of shared governance between the state and local communities operating through their elected school boards. Local control has been the heart and soul of strong Wisconsin communities. And, it is at the local level that we can best work to close the achievement gap.

The prescriptive nature of the ESEA runs contrary to Wisconsin's tradition of local control. Federal accountability means more state standardized testing, federal identification of schools in need of improvement, national testing through the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP), and more required data collection and reporting.

The federal law is not short on requirements, but with the failure last week of the amendment supported by Sens. Kohl and Feingold to fully fund Title I, we do need to act on our concern that No Child Left Behind is an underfunded federal mandate already.

My commitment, as state superintendent, is to partner with you as we implement the ESEA. We must stay focused on our New Wisconsin Promise to ensure a quality teacher in every classroom, a strong leader in every school, early learning opportunities, an emphasis on literacy, small class sizes that allow for more individual attention to students, support for career and technical education as a pathway to ensure productive citizens, and increased parental and community involvement.

Wisconsin educators are not interested in teaching to a test and labeling schools with sanctions but rather achieving a standard of accountability that proves our students can apply the knowledge they attain as productive, contributing citizens of a democracy. We must stay focused on what we know works in Wisconsin if we are to truly leave no child behind.

One thing we all can agree on is that the quality of the teacher in the classroom increases student achievement. It is what the teacher knows and is able to do in the classroom that influences student learning. And, in Wisconsin, we have some of the best teachers in the country. We also know something else about those outstanding teachers—they are at retirement age.

This puts us at a critical juncture. We must seize the opportunity that the PI 34 Wisconsin Quality Educator licensing reform law can provide. We can make PI 34 really work for local school districts in recruiting, retaining, and developing the next generation of quality Wisconsin educators.

You might be thinking, this is the first I've heard of PI 34. Where do we start? You can begin by looking at what you currently do in your school district and ensuring that existing district professional development resources and state and federal dollars are committed to quality educators as the foundation of higher student achievement.

The major education organizations, including your own, have been working collaboratively on an implementation plan for PI 34 that supports the ESEA guidelines. This year, collaborative teams will hold

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regional meetings around the state to share plans that allow flexibility and options for implementation of PI 34.

It will be essential that we all work together to achieve the goal of a quality educator in every classroom. When we speak of the Wisconsin Quality Educator Initiative, PI 34, we must never lose sight that the art of teaching is so much more than what a law can define. The source of good teaching is the human heart.

I would guess that if we went out into the general public, including students, and asked them to list the requirements of PI 34, we would be met with blank stares. But, if we asked them to describe a quality teacher or administrator, the characteristics and standards would all be embodied in PI 34.

In challenging and complex times, which we certainly are in, we all need caring, committed people in our lives who guide our thinking and help us feel connected to our faith and hope in the future. And, as Wisconsin education leaders, we understand we must be those committed to keeping the future alive in our communities. Our work is not just to teach students but also to build citizens. Our democracy is supported by voters and taxpayers but demands an educated citizenry. That is our mission.

I commend all of you for your commitment and service to your community and our children. Our best and most important work is needed during the challenging times ahead. All our children deserve the same chance to make the most of their talents and rise to their dreams. That's the great promise we have always made in Wisconsin. It is now our job to make sure we keep it.

Responsibility, opportunity, commitment—everyone in the education system must come around these values if we are to succeed in prioritizing our resources. There is hard work to be done, but it is the noble work of building the future.

Thank you for the countless hours you dedicate to the children of your communities and our state. I am honored to work for you and with you.